

NRRS Q&As
5/4/99

Q. Let us begin by asking you for a profile of your typical reservation customer: how many are in his/her party, how they are equipped, when they come and how long they stay?

A. We get a full mix: retirees touring the nation, young families off for the weekend, individuals who prefer primitive camping and groups. They come equipped with everything from tents to trailers. Some stay for a weekend, others for several days at a time.

Q. What is the average value of a reservation?

A. \$50-55 for the year to date.

Q. To date, for the most part, your sales have been limited to call centers. When do Internet sales begin?

A. The go-live date is during the week of May 3rd. This will be a “soft” go-live without any major announcements so that we can ensure a smooth start to Internet sales and give all concerned – our customers and ourselves – the opportunity to become accustomed to the technical side of Internet sales before significant numbers of users sign on.

Q. Is there any other reason for a “soft” go-live?

A. Of course. Although we have tested and retested the Internet site, there is always the possibility of a last-minute glitch that has gone undetected. We need the flexibility to fix any technical problems without any major disruptions in service or expectations.

Q. When will you issue news releases and let the public know about Internet availability?

A. We expect to be ready a few weeks – as soon as we have reassured ourselves that the site is ready to handle large numbers of hits.

Q. In the meantime, how will recreation seekers even know about the site?

A. We advertised the address, <http://reserveusa.com>, last summer when we announced the start-up of the service and have been getting a constant flow of visitors. We are also alerting callers waiting in the queue at the call center about the availability of the site.

Q. What do you expect will happen at the call center when Internet sales go live? Will the busy-outs go away?

A. On the contrary. We expect the announcement will bring an immediate increase in the number of reservation seekers, so ReserveAmerica, our contractor, is preparing to have extra sales agents on hand.

Q. How many reservations have you made to date and how much revenue have you generated?

A. The numbers are constantly growing and ever-increasing each week. Through April 28, the total approaches 113,000 reservations and nearly \$6 million in revenue. This breaks down to nearly 68,000 reservations and \$3.4 million for the Corps and nearly 45,000 reservations and almost \$2.4 million in revenue for the Forest Service

Q. On average, how many reservations do you make each week?

A. The number varies by season and has been increasing. When we began last fall, the total was very low. When we added inventory in March and announced the change, the total rose dramatically. During the period 15-28 April, the total was 17,307, which is 19% of the total reservations made since the first of the year. It is important to remember that the Corps had local – rather than a national – services in the past. For example, all campgrounds at Thurmond Lake had 5,000 reservations in all last year. This number will be exceeded within days.

Q. Have you been able to establish a trend in the number of reservations?

A. Not yet. We will use this season to establish a baseline. While there is historical data for the Forest Service, we have none for the Corps. At this moment, we are experiencing demand for Corps sites that is well beyond our original projections.

Q. How have you responded to the trend?

A. When we got the surge in calls in early March, ReserveAmerica immediately began hiring new sales agents, then increased both the number of agents on duty and call hours in mid-March as soon as they were trained. We expanded hours again on April 1 for the summer season so that we now take calls from 8 a.m. (EDT) to midnight.

Q. You have labeled the NRRS as a fast, efficient and convenient service, yet you've been experiencing busy-outs for six-seven weeks in a row. Why?

A. We are trying to project the numbers of reservations on a daily basis. ReserveAmerica evaluates the number made and the number of busyouts and does a complete analysis to project the number of callers in order to be certain that staffing levels are appropriate. ReserveAmerica has added staff in anticipation of current and future projections, but is still trying to get ahead of the demand curve. ReserveAmerica doubled its hiring/training cycle, then redoubled and redoubled it again. We are all, agencies and contractor alike, still catching up to success.

Q. Some would say that there has been an abundance of poor planning. How many reservations had you projected by this time in comparison to the number that has been actually made?

A. We can answer this in terms of transactions. ReserveAmerica had anticipated 96,000 through April. The actual number was over 119,000, so we exceeded our projections by 25 per cent. April has been the busiest month with 38,000 transactions projected and 50,000 actual.

Q. What did you use as a basis for your projections?

A. We had historical data from the Forest Service but no full historical data from the Corps. There had been a smattering of local reservation services within the Corps. As

we began to add inventory and market the service, the numbers have exceeded expectations, especially from Corps customers. Last year the Corps made 125,000 reservations in all. So far this year under the NRRS, we have made nearly 67,000 reservations by late April, and the calls are increasing. If you go back to the start-up of the service, the total is 80,000.

Q. Did you examine other reservation services, not just for camping but for commercial activities that most of us take for granted?

A. We examined a number of state outdoor recreation services as well as a Canadian service and looked at commercial services such as hotels, airlines and rental cars in the planning process.

Q. How do your results to date measure by comparison to the local reservation services that you relied upon in years past?

A. The numbers will far exceed our past services. But there are other differences: you can reserve a site up to 240 days in advance – that's well before the season begins, you have wider variety of sites available and you have multiple ways to make a reservation.

Q. It sounds as if you've been more successful than you imagined. Will there be camping spaces for walk-ins as the season progresses?

A. Of course. If a reservable site is not in use and a camper is not expected during your stay, you are welcome to camp on it right away. Most campgrounds are keeping a number of sites available for walk-in campers.

Q. Do you have any locations that have been sold out and, if so, what have you done to notify your regular campers?

A. There is a daily arrival report provided to campground managers. We know – and repeat campers know – that high volume campgrounds will be full on prime weekends and holidays. That is now, as it always has been, a common experience at our campgrounds. While we consider local publicity about full campgrounds to be the responsibility of local managers, we have a "what's available" icon on the Internet site. Sales agents in the call center cannot speak to a specific site until they are asked.

Q. You had always planned on field site sales (Park Office). How are you progressing with this sales channel?

A. We have completed field testing at a number of campgrounds and continue to send computers to other campgrounds so that they can take part in on-site sales this season as soon as the local manager is prepared to take part. We have learned a great deal from the field-testing, we have already upgraded the software and we believe we have an excellent way for walk-in campers to take advantage of the reservation service. Further, the campground management program provides us a better tool for tracking our campground usage.

Q. Some of your rangers and other staff are complaining that they have not received the computers they were promised to make the service work. How can you expect them to take care of their campers while they wait?

A. We are confident our Rangers will do everything possible to provide the setting for our visitors to enjoy the outdoors experience. A computer is not necessary to operate the campground, and most NRRS participating campgrounds do not operate with computers. Daily reports provide the information on incoming reservations, and walk-in customers are welcome, as sites are available.

Q. It sounds as if you've underestimated requirements right along and your campers are suffering as a result. I say suffering in the way of uncertainty about whether camping sites will be available for family vacations, reunions and so on. What are you doing to take care of the concerns that campers have expressed?

A. ReserveAmerica has made an extraordinary effort to hire and train new sales agents and our agency teams, together with ReserveAmerica staff have been working long hours and weekends to ensure the best possible start for Internet and campground sales. It has been a complicated and complex task, and they are doing everything possible to ensure that we live up to our original promise to provide a fast, easy and efficient service.

Q. Why not go back to your old system until this one is truly ready to go? In other words, why impose hardship on everyone while you learn to operate this system?

A. We are all committed to implement the new reservation service during this recreation season. Fact is, we are well on our way to making record numbers of reservations. We recognize there are some challenges that are typical with any major change or startup of a new system. We are working to minimize these challenges, and yet still provide quality customer service.

Q. What hints would you offer to callers – about the best time to call and the kinds of questions and information to have ready?

A. Now, the best times to call are weekends, and during the week after 1:00 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays are typically busier than other days. However, this is changing as more agents are added and Internet and campground sales become active. Truthfully, the best time to call is during the "off season" during the fall and winter months. However, this is not possible for all customers. Callers should have their credit card information handy, the specific campground name, and their arrival and departure dates.

Q. What expectations do you have for reservation totals this year and how does it compare to ordinary years?

A. We had projected 431,000-plus reservations. This included 173,000 for the Forest Service and 258,000 for the Corps. We will exceed our expectations. Again, it is important to remember that we had baseline data for the Forest Service but not the Corps.

Q. Anything to add?

A. Yes, we are providing a one-stop shopping resource that is convenient, efficient, and effective. All of this is designed to provide the best customer service. It is the largest outdoor recreation reservation service of its type, and the demand will only grow.

